

VZCZCXRO2565
PP RUEHCHI RUEHDT RUEHNNH
DE RUEHHM #1136/01 3130837
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 090837Z NOV 07
FM AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3322
INFO RUEHHI/AMEMBASSY HANOI PRIORITY 2287
RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHHM/AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY 3537

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 HO CHI MINH CITY 001136

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FOR EAP/MLS AND DRL/AWH

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [VM](#)
SUBJECT: SHIFTING PRESS PARADIGM IN SOUTHERN VIETNAM

REF: REF A: HCMC 965 REF B: HCMC 320

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11. (SBU) Summary: While Vietnam remains far from achieving true freedom of the press, the paradigm is starting to shift across southern Vietnam. Already, the old "total control model" in which the Government of Vietnam (GVN) essentially dictated what papers should publish has given way to a "censorship model" in which the GVN generally limits itself to telling the press what not to publish. Newspapers routinely push the envelope by publishing right up to (if not over) the limits laid down by censors. Despite continued tensions between the GVN and the media and even occasional acts of retribution against media outlets and individuals who publish too freely, the long-term trend remains positive. Motivated by a combination of journalistic zeal and a desire to boost revenues by attracting readers, more and more media outlets are showing a willingness to tackle controversial topics and test the limits of censorship. Despite continuing to censor, the GVN itself -- or at least a number of its most senior officials -- is actually facilitating increased press freedom by being more willing to discuss controversial topics such as corruption, poor public services and health publicly. In addition, some officials have publicly lauded the very same press outlets that have been criticized by other parts of the GVN. The resulting mixed message makes it clear that censors are no longer omnipotent and media outlets are increasingly learning how to bend the rules without consequences. End Summary.

THE COMMUNIST DAILY'S NEW LEASE ON LIFE

12. (SBU) Little more than a year ago, reading Saigon Giai Phong (Saigon Liberation -- the official paper of the Communist Party of Ho Chi Minh City)(SGP) was like reading a 1970's vintage issue of Pravda, albeit in Vietnamese rather than Russian. The same bombast and toadyism permeated pages filled with articles about the great advances made by heroic leaders to achieve lofty goals for the betterment of the people -- all with no details. While articles of that nature still appear in SGP, most of the paper is filled with straightforward news about current economic, social, health and other mainstream issues found in most American papers. Even the front page looks remarkably like any American newspaper, with prominent stories on corruption scandals and tirades against government inefficiency mixed in with business and human interest stories along with updates on the most recent disaster (weather, roads, etc.). Even more interestingly, SGP was in the forefront of a media blitz that helped prevent censors from canceling the publication of the Vietnamese version of the book "A Perfect Spy" (ref A).

13. (SBU) The story behind the publication of "A Perfect Spy" provides a good example of one method the press uses to confound

the censors. After learning that censors were leaning toward banning publication, media outlets preemptively ran multiple articles on the book, including publishing excerpts. This did not violate any explicit ruling, since the work had not yet been banned. Related articles--based on interviews with the author and previous Vietnamese books written about the same spy--avoided scrutiny from the censors while clearly building a public expectation that the book would soon be available in bookstores. In the end, the censors backed down and the book was not banned (and instead became an instant best seller). One key to the success of this "guerilla media campaign" in which numerous media outlets participated was the editors' knowledge that while the book clearly broke new ground by contradicting "official" histories of the war years, the book also appealed to a number of senior leaders who understand the need to broaden the freedom to print straightforward, accurate histories. Senior party leadership, including President Triet and former PM Vo Van Kiet, received advanced copies courtesy of the pro-publication advocates and then commented that they liked the book and found nothing objectionable in it.

IT'S NOT ALL EASY GOING -- JUST ASK THE PIONEER

14. (SBU) Censorship of the press continues. No paper dares to publish articles on human rights in Vietnam, the advantages of direct elections and the democratic process or any of a wide range of other topics. They do not dare directly criticize the nation's top leaders. Even in areas that are generally open to criticism such as economic issues, planning, infrastructure, corruption, education, business and health care, there are clear limits to what can be said about GVN's top leadership. In a highly unfortunate incident, the GVN decided not to renew the contracts of two top editors at Vietnam's largest circulation (and very pro-reform) daily paper Tuoi Tre (Young Age). At present, the two editors remain in place at Tuoi Tre until their contracts run out at the end of this year. They have not yet received word on their future assignments, but will likely reappear in different media positions. Sources say the editors were targeted because the paper defied censors by publishing

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detailed stories reporting on alleged corruption by Vietnam's state bank governor in the issuance of new polymer banknotes. While contacts also report that Tuoi Tre was criticized for being too aggressive with its articles advocating more democratic reforms in the run-up to the 2006 Party Congress (ref B), former PM Kiet and others have told us that Tuoi Tre's decision to directly defy censors three times by publishing additional articles on the banknote scandal contributed to the GVN's decision not to renew terms for the two editors.

15. (SBU) Tuoi Tre reporters attempted unsuccessfully to reinstate the former editors via petition, and others outside the paper have also voiced their objections to the editorial changeup. Former Prime Minister Kiet, one of the key architects of Vietnam's doi moi (renovation) policy and an outspoken reformer, called the decision "too harsh" and said the Union's "administrative shirt has become too tight" for a newspaper as big as Tuoi Tre. One senior HCMC news editor's prediction that events at Tuoi Tre "will not succeed in changing the newspaper's attitude," has proven entirely correct -- the paper is as feisty as ever and continues to push the envelope of free speech almost daily. The same editor added that although many newspapers are directed to submit "self-criticism" reports to authorities after being cited for violations, he and his fellow reporters "have no regrets" and continue to push forward.

THE ROLE OF THE PARLIAMENT AND VARIOUS GVN AGENCIES

16. (SBU) A number of Vietnamese institutions, including senior officials, the Parliament as well as numerous regulatory bodies, are playing a strong -- even if unintentional -- role in promoting more active, honest reporting. They play this role because they are willing to provide accurate information or even to criticize the GVN on the record. A hard-hitting Tuoi Tre article berating GVN anti-corruption campaigns as being long on

rhetoric but short on teeth was bolstered by numerous quotes from Parliamentary debate in which representatives criticized the apparent disconnect between the strength of senior officials' anti-corruption rhetoric and the weakness of the actions normally taken when wrongdoing occurs. Even the MPS (an organization not generally noted for pro-reform tendencies) was cited repeatedly in the Tuoi Tre article because they provided statistics showing that even as the dollar value convicted corruption cases has increased, the fines levied have declined.

17. (SBU) Another HCMC daily paper, Thanh Nien, has proven particularly adept eliciting juicy comments from senior former officials who, despite having left their GVN postings, remain well connected enough that censors would definitely think twice before trying to silence them. A former vice minister of the economy, for example, was quoted as saying that the main impediment to improving Vietnam's antiquated and counterproductive land use laws is that under the current system corrupt officials can collude with private businesses to gain control of huge tracts of valuable land. Backed up with detailed statistics and good research, that quote made for high-impact reporting that pushes the envelope on corruption reporting by implicating the whole system rather than just of individuals.

18. (SBU) As these examples show, increased exposure to outside media (including programs funded through our Public Affairs Section) are helping by developing the professionalism of reporters in Southern Vietnam. Rather than publishing unverifiable accusations of corruption or mismanagement, the print media, in particular, develop highly detailed and sourced feature length articles filled with statistics, facts and quotes from official sources and well-known, well-placed individuals. It is very difficult for censors to criticize the resulting article without also criticizing the array of GVN officials and agencies who supplied the information presented.

THE PROFIT MOTIVE AND PUBLIC APPETITE FOR NEWS

19. (SBU) While we have no doubt that a dedication to their profession plays a big role in motivating editors to push forward with reforms in spite of the risks and harassment that can result, that is not the only reason. Part of what is feeding the now widespread movement toward more straightforward reporting is the nexus of the profit motive and the public's appetite for genuine news. Even though every media outlet is tied to some GVN or CP organ, nearly all are also financially self-supporting. After ten years of almost constantly pushing the envelope in terms of what can be published in Vietnam, the newspaper Tuoi Tre rose from being a youth organization's newsletter to become the nation's largest circulation and most profitable daily and the cornerstone of a growing media empire. Tuoi Tre is not only Vietnam's largest circulation daily, its circulation is larger than the next five dailies combined. It

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is no surprise that other HCMC-based dailies such as Thanh Nien and Saigon Giai Phong have been motivated to follow -- and perhaps try to surpass -- Tuoi Tre's pioneering example. Other print media outlets, such as Phap Luat (The Law) have expanded from a weekly to a daily format. Even niche publications such as Phu Nu (Woman) are jumping into investigative reporting. The competition is on to see who can print the news that Vietnamese readers want to purchase.

WORKING TOGETHER FOR A FREER MEDIA

19. (SBU) Despite competition for readership, newspapers remain willing to support each other when one is threatened. The publication of "A Perfect Spy" described earlier provides one example of this phenomenon since numerous papers and one TV station joined a campaign to prevent censors from killing the book's publication. A recent press battle surrounding comments by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Education Nguyen Thien Nhan provides an even more telling example. Nhan, a southerner and U.S. Fulbright alumni often lauded for his

pro-reform agenda suffered a serious case of "foot in mouth disease" when he told reporters asking about his education initiative that "having fewer students in school because of recent hikes in school fees was acceptable." When Nhan's comments were printed in SGP, Nhan fired back by writing to the paper's editor that "the reporter needs to be brought to face punishments according to the law." Nhan went on to accuse the reporter of using statistics from foreign sources, thus "insulting and demonizing the fatherland." Within days, other news outlets began publishing the notes from their reporters and an entire recording of Nhan's ill-chosen words appeared on popular blogs, including one associated with the editor of Phap Luat newspaper. Due to Nhan's attempt to have the reporter sanctioned, what started as a minor story in one paper became a major story in almost every media outlet across the south and the person whose reputation suffered was not the reporter's but the DPM's.

ENTER THE WEB LOGS

¶10. (SBU) The emergence of personal web logs, or blogs, is noteworthy as journalist bloggers start to touch on domestic politics, with the information made available publicly on the internet. Despite GVN efforts to control the Internet, blogs are spreading and some reporters from traditional media are keeping blogs, as is at least one member of the national Parliament. One advantage of blogs is that their very nature makes them free from prior censorship since information is posted directly from a blogger's PC to the web, unlike a newspaper article that runs through a series of editors and typesetters. So, while bloggers still face the same risk of being charged with violating national security rules if they blatantly violate censorship guidelines, as long as they only push the envelope they can defend themselves by pleading ignorance -- "no one told me NOT to publish that."

COMMENT

¶11. (SBU) Make no mistake -- censorship lives and is the rule in Vietnam. Despite this, however, we should not underestimate the importance of this paradigm shift from a "total control" model to a "censorship model." Similarly, while we know of many examples of reporters and media outlets that have been criticized by various GVN officials for pushing the envelope too far, the good news is that they continue to push it anyway. The firing of two editors from Tuoi Tre has not changed the paper's content one bit; neither did a police decision to harass participants at a Consulate-sponsored training program for economics reporters at SGP. Despite these acts of harassment, the papers press on and enjoy wide, high-level support. We suspect that former Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet is not alone in his view that Vietnam needs to dismantle most administrative controls over the press in order to develop a "competitive media environment." End comment.

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